DISBELIEVING FOR JOY
Luke 24:36-53
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Today I envy the Eastern Orthodox branches of the Christian family. Because of learned doctors of the church splitting hairs and different calendars 400 years ago, they are celebrating Easter today. We have already swept it under the rug. The only lingering traces of Easter for us are a few strands of plastic grass which won't be discovered until they are vacuumed up in June. Easter goes too fast. At least with Christmas you still have trees up and nativity scenes out for twelve days or so. With Easter, it's all over in a flash. Forty days of preparation, a big day, a big dinner, and it's over. And we're left with ancient events like today's lesson which catch in our throats for all their strangeness and roll off the sensibilities of our minds.

That Jesus Christ appeared to the disciples is part of our earliest New Testament record. Paul mentions it in his first letter to the Corinthians (and the affirmation of faith we say today is from that passage). The accounts of the appearance are somewhat troubling. You can hardly get John or Luke to agree on the event. For that matter, you can hardly find many manuscripts or translations to agree on what was originally written. That in itself isn't unusual. Get a husband and wife to separately tell you how they met and why they married and you can see why writers might not agree.

How do we explain what happened? The disciples were gathered together shortly after Easter morning. Something powerful happened. Something which caught them by surprise. The presence of Christ was so powerful that it seemed too good to be true and they could hardly believe it, much less describe it. With any event that plays a significant role in our lives, we find ourselves tongue-tied when trying to describe it. The facts alone seem so flat, we usually wind up in exasperation saying something like, "you would have had to have been there."

What events are remembered? To refute the early heresy that Jesus really had no flesh and blood but was only a "spirit" the church remembered how Jesus had displayed his wounded hands. Then to clinch any disagreement, he asked if there was any food left and swallowed some fish to prove that he was solid. A powerful event at the time. Two thousand years later, it almost seems like a joke.

And there's nothing stranger than having to explain a joke. If you have to explain it, it's no longer a joke but an awkward convoluted description of images which leaves you wondering how you could have failed to tell it right. Perhaps our feeling of Easter is something akin to that. Easter is God's holy joke to the world. Do you get it? Love is triumphant, death is not the last word, life is really much more than it seems, and someone no less than the Lord Almighty was born to a hick carpenter and his virgin wife in an animal stall, mocked as a play king, and died a criminal's death as a political insurrectionist. We hear the punch line, and we say, "we don't understand."

An early Greek Orthodox tradition was for the clergy and laity to gather in the sanctuary the day after Easter to tell jokes and stories. The reason given was that this was the most fitting way of celebrating the big joke which God pulled on Satan in the resurrection. A similar custom is preserved in some rural Slavic areas where folk dancing and feasting take place in the church yard after Easter.

What could be more appropriate after Easter than laughter, gaiety and lightheartedness that comes through renewed faith in God's power and victory? Lent signifies contemplation and preparation. And if Good Friday symbolizes sin and death and

sorrow as well as love, Easter celebrates the recovery of life and hope and laughter.

OK, you say, Easter should be fun. Whoopee. But life isn't a bowl of cherries and laughter doesn't last long.

What does last for me is the overwhelming importance of the resurrection, that our God is a living God. Not like other religions where God might be enshrined, or embalmed or entombed. Ultimately what counts is that God continues to live.

God continues to live and to appear to us when least expected and when we fail to recognize who it is. And the instant of the appearance we are filled with disbelief and wonder....it's too good to be true. So we quickly cover it over and try to forget about that strange event. Quickly covering it over is what we normally do when some event occurs which tears the veil hiding the inner sanctum of our minds, our holy of holies, and exposes it to the light.

The phone rings at night. Something inside us knows that the call will tell us that our child..or our parent, or spouse...has been in an accident. During the four rings it takes us to get to the phone, images spill over one another...how we'll miss them, what we'll do, how we'll survive, what will we say to the family, and what will we say to the police sergeant on the other end. We anxiously pick up the phone...they're calling just to let us know they're having a great time and will see us soon. We sigh a sigh of relief.

For an instant we are aware of how <u>much</u> they mean to us and how <u>little</u> things like the car they were driving, or their house mean. For an instant we see everything in a different light. It doesn't last long. We won't let events such as that affect us. We are being tugged so powerfully in so many directions that we don't pay very much attention to anyone or anything. If something comes along that challenges our notions about how the world should operate, we dismiss or repress it.

It's too good to be true--when you are overwhelmed by flowers and food from rallying friends,--when you're told the person you'd love taking to the prom is secretly hoping you'll ask,--when the young person who hasn't said a kind word in years comes home and casually remarks how great the food and the parents are. It's too good to be true--when the doctor says, "it's not malignant"--and for a brief moment, our window of vulnerability is open and we know what life is all about. In that moment, the Risen Christ is present whether we recognize him or not.

On the road to Emmaus, two travelers look back on how their hearts "burned within them" before they recognized him (Luke 24:32). The fishermen along the Sea of Tiberias don't recognize him until he does a miracle by having them fish on the right side of their boat (John 21).

Our text doesn't say whether or not the disciples ever believe or not once they saw Jesus eat the fish. What history books tell us and what our own lives confirm is that those disciples who were so shocked they couldn't believe it was true, went on to turn the whole world up-side-down. Christ came to them as he comes to us, when he is needed the most.

We yearn nostalgically for the past and despair about the uncertainty of the future. The present spits in our face. We lock our minds behind closed doors and suddenly apparitions appear; the specter of nuclear annihilation, the haunting faces of unemployment, and the fading hopes that our children could be anything they wished, and that our golden years would be comfortable. In the midst of those ghosts, Christ comes bringing peace. The peace that passes understanding. The peace that helps us overcome the numbness and to move on, and to act.

Crises come. There is no escape. But the Greek word "crisis" means decision. Crises are events that open our eyes to new possibilities. And Christ is present in those crises.

Movies these days graphically reflect almost every aspect of life and death, but rarely do they deal with crises in terms of personal religious faith. With the notable exception of "Chariots of Fire," movie people don't seem to pray or to have any religious thoughts.

To me, one of the beauties of "Chariots of Fire" is the honest portrayal of one man's disbelieving joy in sensing God's desire for him to exercise his talent for running. Eric Liddell was a famous Scots rugby player who wanted to become a missionary. He wrestles with his belief in trying to know what to do. In a spontaneous moment embarrassing faith and personal renewal, Liddell realizes that he is somehow to run for the glory of God before he heads for the mission fields of China. As he explains to his brother and sister, "I believe God made me for a purpose. But he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure...to win is to honor him." And he does. Eric Liddell was a hero of the 1924 Olympics.

Harold Abrahams, the movie's other main character and runner is constantly confronted with his obsession for winning in order to prove his worth in British society. He also succeeds at the Olympics. Abraham's crisis comes over his ability to cope with victory after single-mindedly pursuing it for so long. The novelist Frederick Beechner describes this type of obsession in his autobiographical The Sacred Journey. He says, "The trouble with steeling yourself against reality is that the same steel that secures your life against being destroyed secures your life also against being opened up and transformed by the holy power that life itself comes from. You can survive on your own. You can grow strong on your own. You can even prevail on your own. But you cannot become human on your own." (p 43). It takes two--one to give and one to receive. It takes two to tell a joke. It takes two for one to recognize, to name the other.

The Holy Other who punches through the surface calm continuity of our lives and for an instant puts all our values into perspective -- the instant we almost hit that other car, or we almost do something crazy in the haze of alcohol or depression, or our heart stops because we think we're almost caught.....

It's too good to be true -- we shouldn't have gotten away with it! That's the moment to take the courage...and yes, the humor...to pull that punched hole wider. To open it up so that our whole life is living in that time of overwhelming gratitude and of heightened awareness about what is ultimately important and in the peace that passes understanding.

"Death, where is your victory? Grave where is your sting?" (I Cor. 16:55). Evil, where is your power? The joke is on you!

Don't be afraid. He is present and he is real.
Death has lost its power - to numb
- to inhibit
- to excuse.
Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!
Nothing can be the same again!

AMEN.